

The Subterraneans Study Guide

The Subterraneans by Jack Kerouac

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Subterraneans Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Pages 1 through 25.....	5
Pages 26 through 50.....	8
Pages 51 through 75.....	11
Pages 76 through 111.....	14
Characters.....	17
Objects/Places.....	20
Themes.....	22
Style.....	25
Quotes.....	28
Topics for Discussion.....	30



Plot Summary

"The Subterraneans" by Jack Kerouac is the story of a group of friends and acquaintances who form a social network that they dubbed 'the subterraneans'. Most in the group are men, and seemingly men who are past their youth. Many in the group are writers and artists or at least wannabes. The main character is Leo Percepied who narrates this stream-of-consciousness work.

Leo just recently arrived in San Francisco. He just ended his position as a messman on a sea-faring ship because of an altercation he had with a fellow ship-mate. But Leo's real profession, or at least the career of his hopes and dreams, is writing. But that pursuit has apparently stalled and is generally mentioned as a future goal. There are reference about getting a typewriter and earning money in the future from writing gigs. This story was written in 1958 before computers were in general use. If Leo was a working writer, he would already have a typewriter and would have writing gigs or writing his own works.

Leo catches up with some old friends of his - the subterraneans as mentioned above - when he returns to San Francisco. The first encounter with the subterraneans that Leo describes takes place in front of a bar where the friends are gathering. This is an appropriate meeting place since, as the story unfolds, it is apparent that most of these friends, including Leo, have substance abuse issues involving both alcohol and drugs. As Leo walks down the hill to the meeting place, he barely makes out the figure of a woman sitting on the fender of a car parked in front of the bar. It is late at night, and the woman, Mardou Fox, is black and from a distance blends into the darkness.

Leo is immediately attracted to Mardou. He becomes obsessed about her and feels he must have her. Initially, she shows no signs of interest in him. She is much younger than Leo, perhaps by as many as fifteen years. However, he continues to pursue her and eventually they become involved in a romantic relationship. Some of his friends who have known Mardou for a while warn Leo not to get involved with her. She has a history of mental illness and is under the care of a therapist. Her mental state is fragile. She is like a ticking time bomb in that no one can predict when she will flip and have a psychotic episode.

Of course, Mardou is not the only one with problems in this story about people with problems! Leo is an alcoholic and has a long history of drug abuse. Although he had been married and is approaching middle age, he lives at home with his domineering mother. Leo doesn't have full-time employment and is taken care of by his mother who works. Leo keeps his relationship with Mardou low-profile because his mother would not approve of a bi-racial relationship. Leo's mother has a huge impact on him and he seems unable to break away from her. Even the unstable Mardou tells him that living with his mother is not healthy for him.

The relationship between Leo and Mardou is short-lived and begins to deteriorate when he continues to be reluctant in fully embracing her and she becomes disillusioned and



begins to find a younger man in the group more appealing. At the story's conclusion, Mardou appears the healthier of the two. She tells Leo she wants her independence and Leo is left with the uncertainty of whether Mardou was the love of his life and if he destroyed his one chance for happiness.



Pages 1 through 25

Pages 1 through 25 Summary

When he was younger, Leo talked with more clarity. In those earlier times, things seemed more clear to him. But through the fog of time and drugs, one can lose focus and memories die. But as he tells his story, he promises those who read it to speak with as much clarity as possible about a part of his life and about the subterraneans. Leo starts with a little explanation of the subterraneans. Julien Alexander is the angel of the subterraneans. The name was invented by Adam Moorad, a poet and a friend, who described the subterraneans as intelligent, intellectual and hip.

Leo first saw Mardou Fox at night as he came down the hill on Montgomery Street in San Francisco to meet his friends. She was leaning against the bumper of a car in front of the Black Mask Bar. She was so dark that he didn't see her at first. She barely showed up against the black night. But it immediately struck him that she was a woman that he had to have. She reminded her of Rita Savage, a girlhood friend of his sister's. He'd fantasize about Rita Savage—his dream, his ideal for years.

Leo gave the "eye" to Mardou but she seemed to ignore him. She was with Julien and his friend Ross Wallenstein. As he stood there, she was saying something quietly to Wallenstein, her face so open and earnest. He had just come off a ship in New York where he was a saloon messman. He had some trouble with the steward and left ship. Other friends, other subterraneans, were there in front of the Black Mask including Roger Beloit, Walt Fitzpatrick and Harriet, the ex-wife of Wallenstein, who he used to have a thing for. Leo never hid the fact that he liked women. The titular leader of the subterraneans, Fritz Nicholas, was there, too, as well as Jack Steen. He asked Fritz if Mardou was going with anyone. Fritz smiled, knowing his friend so well, and responded that she wasn't going with anyone in particular at the time.

After having some drinks, the group went to Larry O'Hara's for tea. Mardou stuck her hand out and introduced herself to Adam Moorad. He felt a sting. She hadn't done the same with him—an omen of things to come. Leo was well aware that his youthful virtues and appeal had died long ago in the years of drug taking. So, on that first night, it was he who stuck his hand out to her. She was in the driver's seat! Later, he spotted Mardou reading something. He asked her what she was reading and was pleasantly surprised at her unusual and lyrical way of speaking. As the group smoked marijuana, his thoughts were focused on being alone with her that very night.

Larry sensed Leo's attraction to Mardou and asked if he was going to "make it" with her that night. He would love to he told him. Of course, it wasn't just up to him. But he was tenacious and tried again, sitting next to her in the corner. But after a short while, she left with several others. Leo spent the next few days fantasizing about her. The next week, Adam told him that he'd run into her. That casual encounter turned into a physical involvement that very day. But Adam learned some jarring information about her.



Mardou had mental problems and was seeing a therapist. Adam was attracted to her but he didn't want to pursue the relationship. She had apparently flipped out over some disagreement with Julien. Apparently, she was suffering from hallucinations. Leo and Adam weren't the only members of the subterraneans that found Mardou appealing. Leo learned that Larry had invited her over so he could make a play for her.

Mardou came to Larry's for dinner that Leo was also attending. He pretended to read while Larry and Mardou were in the kitchen but was focused on their interactions. After dinner, they all went to the Red Drum to hear jazz. Larry, apparently losing interest in Mardou, left early so Leo could be alone with Mardou. After more music and drinks, Leo and Mardou went to her Heavenly Lane apartment. The building was like a tenement - wash hanging out on most back porches. Inside the apartment, Mardou put some music on and they danced and kissed. Mardou seemed emotional and shared some personal information with him. Her black mother died when she was born, and she had an unknown Cherokee half-breed father who left her mother before she was born.

Although their love affair lasted two months, she never used the word "love." After they made love that first night, his thoughts turned to his humble home in south city. He had developed and cared for it. He told her he had to leave as she lay there on the white sheet. She reacted in a hysterical manner, demanding to know why he had to go so soon. He had work to do and responsibilities, he told her. He had to nurse his hangover so he could navigate through the next day. The next time Leo saw Mardou he had stayed the night at Adam's. She called Adam and told him she was going to her therapist. Leo made arrangements to see her later. She shared more information about herself. Although she was much younger than Leo, just like him Mardou had regrets about her life and choices. She was artistic and talented. She had been told she could become a great sculptress. But then. . . she lost her mind.

Pages 1 through 25 Analysis

Leo is attempting to relive his youth with his affair with the much younger Mardou. He is fascinated with the exotic girl who recalls to him another time, a less complicated, more innocent time. She reminds him of his youth because she resembles or reminds him of a girl that he was attracted to as a young man. He had held out that girl of long ago as his ideal. Now, so many years later, he meets her again. He recognizes that he is not as appealing as he was in his youth.

Leo is older than Mardou. He has been damaged and scarred by all the years of drinking and drug abuse. By saying that he has to "stick out his hand" to Mardou, he is acknowledging that he has to make the first move because he is not as attractive as he once was. And apparently isn't as attractive as the other man who Mardou held her hand out to. But even in her relatively brief life, she does not come without baggage. She is needy and fragile. She has been hurt by love and has emotional or mental problems. There is a reluctance for him to get involved but yet he is drawn to her. Two emotionally dependent people have found one another—probably not a recipe for a positive relationship.



The subterraneans are a group of self-proclaimed pseudo-intellectuals. The word "subterranean" connotes an aura of a dark and clandestine existence or world. It also evokes an image of the "other," those not part of normal society. Perhaps they have been rejected by that normal society or they have rejected it. Those who are part of this subterranean culture live by their own standards which undoubtedly would not generally be accepted by society as a whole. The subterraneans exist in a shadow world. If their isolation from society is self-inflicted, perhaps they have failed in the real world. Leo, the narrator, confesses to years of drug abuse which certainly indicates an anti-social, even criminal behavior. He relates to Mardou because they have co-dependent personalities and feel they abandoned their better selves in the past.



Pages 26 through 50

Pages 26 through 50 Summary

Mardou told Leo about an incident in which she found herself out in an alley in the rain naked. She was at a party and when she came back inside she had a fist fight with Jack Steen. Everyone in the room was high. No one seemed to react to her presence although she remained naked. Earlier, she had been in a store with Jack when she saw a beautiful brooch that Jack said would look beautiful on her brown skin. Mardou decided she had to have it ran to a friend's house to borrow \$2 so she could buy it. She went to a coffee shop first where she knew everyone wanted to look at her. But they were afraid of her and the electric vibrations coming from her eyes. She bought the brooch and had ten cents left. She went to the drugstore and looked over the postcard display for two hours. She was obsessed with getting just the right cards and she only had enough money to buy two. People noticed she'd been there a long time and that she was dirty and unkempt. The night before she had no place to stay and had sat up at a diner all night.

Leo asked why Jack Steen or Julien or Walt Fitzpatrick hadn't loaned her money or given her a place to stay. They didn't want her around, she told him. She'd spent a year with the group and had become disillusioned with the drugs and drinking. Mardou even suspected that they injected her with drugs at times which would explain why she'd flip out and go walk the streets. She'd always feel the electricity, a connection with strangers as she walked. Mardou would roam the streets taking comfort from her brooch that she always wore. Mardou was attracted to a pet shop and spent time there. The proprietor was man in a wheelchair and seemed to like to talk to her about nothing special. She felt a real connection with the him.

Leo tried to visualize Mardou interacting with the strange characters he knew of in the neighborhood. She told him about a black man in a mechanics shop who came on to her. He exposed himself to her but then became embarrassed and turned from her. It was Easter and she thought how her life could have been like that sunny spring morning. But it was all a facade - it was all really sinister. To celebrate Easter, she went to her sisters' house. They were upset with her because she was late. She told them off and then noticed some strange things. Her elder sister had wired her TV to the radio. Mardou became angry and upset accusing her sister of trying to electrocute her. The sisters saw that something was really wrong and called the police who took her to the hospital. She talked to the doctors there who recommended therapy.

Leo asked her if she would like to go to Mexico with him if he got enough money together. He was supposed to be getting five hundred dollars for a writing gig. Mardou was thrilled and wanted to go with him. But as they talked, she sensed that he was changing his mind. He tried to ease her worries and he assured her he wanted her to go with him. They stayed at Adam's that night and when Adam saw them still asleep on the couch the next day, he scolded Mardou for not keeping her appointment with her



psychoanalyst. He admonished Leo for letting her miss it. That night two girls joined them for dinner. There was sadness in Mardou's eyes. Later, she told Leo she had been upset because of the attention the girls were giving him.

They both got very drunk that night. They took a cab and were heading for Mardou's apartment but Leo suddenly stopped the cab, got out and took another cab. Inexplicably, even to him, he had run out on her. A few days later, he appeared again at her apartment. Mardou told him she felt jealous and threatened because he lived at home with his mother who takes care of him. Although he did not express his thoughts to Mardou, he silently acknowledged to himself that he was neurotic and lived with the ever-present weight of a need to go home. After meeting Mardou, he seemed to be always second-guessing himself. Should he stay with Mardou? Should he go home? But their relationship was deepening and they made plans for a future together. Leo promised that he'd get a typewriter and earn royalties from writing. He'd get Mardou a whole new wardrobe. But he had to continually fight the guilt he felt about leaving his mother alone. He thought about pursuing a more traditional way to earn a living and thought about getting a job on the railroad. He'd earn enough so they could live together. He admitted to her that he felt all mixed up inside.

Leo had doubts about Mardou because she was black, sloppy and had been insane. He wasn't sure of her devotion to him either. One night he was at her apartment and several men were knocking on the door. Mardou left Leo in bed and answered the door naked. He could hear her tell the men that she wasn't alone and to come back the next day. Leo knew that Mardou wasn't stable and never knew when something would set her off. He'd often think to himself that he should make life easier for himself and get a sane, white girl. But Leo had tender feelings for Mardou. He didn't want to hurt her.

Leo's mother and sister would not be in favor of his relationship with a black girl. There were so many strikes against them, but he could not resist her. Mardou had taken from him the dreams he had had all his life. She made him want her. She was exotic and something he's never known before. Adam encouraged their relationship. He thought they made a good couple. Mardou, at times, would grow dissatisfied with Leo and want to break up. They never do anything together, she complained. Unknown to Mardou, he was always concerned about his "tyrannical" mother who would object to Mardou. Mardou told him it wasn't good for him to live with his mother. But Leo defended living with his mother. They had a good relationship. When she came home from work all tired out, he'd make her dinner and have a martini ready for her. He'd clean up to give her more time to watch TV. Adam encouraged him to live his own life—away from his mother. Leo was constantly finding fault with Mardou. He even feared that she was a thief. He was sure she had stolen a photo from another friend, Bernard. He confronted her about it but she denied having stolen it.

But despite everything that was wrong with Mardou, Leo still wanted her.



Pages 26 through 50 Analysis

Leo claims he is in love with Mardou. It's obvious that Leo needs Mardou but does he love her? Doubts are rising up in his mind about her. As it turns out, her race is bothering him. He describes his mother as "tyrannical" and not in favor of an inter-racial relationship. It is not clear if his mother knows about Mardou or if Leo just knows how she would react to him having a black girlfriend. To avoid admitting that he has a racial bias, he is transferring his own fears and doubts to his mother who he can blame if he breaks off his relationship with Mardou. He doesn't want to face the possibility that he is a racist. Mardou complains that he doesn't take her out. Maybe he doesn't want to be seen with her.

Leo, who is a grown man and has been married before, lives with his mother. He doesn't appear to have much income and he speaks of his mother coming home after work and being tired. She is parent to his child. Leo is overly dependent on his mother. His dependent personality emerges again in his relationship with Mardou. He is relying on Mardou as a means of escaping from his mother - even if it's only a temporary escape. His choice to have a relationship with a black woman - someone his mother would disapprove of - may symbolize rebellion against his mother, albeit in a passive-aggressive manner. He claims to love Mardou but he doesn't share his inner thoughts or feelings with her.

In a sense, Mardou who has a history of insanity and shows signs that she is still unstable, is stronger than Leo. She lives on her own although it is a day to day struggle. She is more open than Leo is. She is not afraid to confront him about their feelings for one another. She is also sensible enough to know that living with his mother is not a healthy situation for Leo. A relationship between Leo and Mardou is not a healthy one—in fact, it's doomed. Mardou's fragile mental state combined with Leo's self-described neurotic behavior and his unhealthy relationship with his mother is not a recipe for a deep long-term relationship.



Pages 51 through 75

Pages 51 through 75 Summary

Not only did Leo have doubts about Mardou, he constantly tested her. He would watch to see how she interacted with other men they socialized with. Could he trust her? He watched how she reacted when he conversed with other women. He tested her to the limits when, on one occasion, he insisted that she go home alone while he stayed at a bar and talked to another woman named, Ariel Lavina, a famous young writer. She was upset but he convinced her that he just wanted to talk shop with Ariel and that he wouldn't be long. They were both very drunk but he finally persuaded her to take a cab home.

After having more drinks, Leo and Ariel became acquainted with a man and went to his hotel suite. The man appeared to be homosexual. Leo woke up the next morning on the couch in the hotel room. He had broken his promise to Mardou - he hadn't shown up at all. He went to Mardou's apartment but she wasn't home. When she did come back a short while later, she had no complaints, but there was a coolness in the air. Leo felt guilty about how drunk he got when he was with Ariel and wrote her a note of apology.

Mardou wrote Leo a letter in which she expressed her hope that they would stay home and that he would be healthy and write. Most of all she didn't want him to be sad which she emphasized throughout her letter. She wanted to have cozy nights together in the upcoming winter. She did not want to go out drinking with his friends.

On one night, a homosexual man went barhopping with them. In a drunken rage, Mardou screamed at Leo that it's "either him or me" (57). She told Leo of the strange nightmares and fantasies she had as a young girl. It was often about her father who had abandoned her. In her letter, she referred to a growing distance between them which was something that they didn't discuss openly. She spoke fondly of waking with him in the morning and sharing their dreams. Reading her letter, Leo was somewhat stunned at what an excellent writer Mardou was and how well she expressed herself. Mardou ended her letter with her vow of love and literally begged him to write back to her - write her "anything."

Mardou became upset with Leo over an incident at the beach involving the homosexual friend. She told Leo he was making a fool of himself. As usual, he was drunk. He slept with Mardou and had a horrible dream. In his dream, his friends, Yuri and Adam, were molesting Mardou. He became enraged and struck both Mardou and Yuri. Leo told Mardou about the dream but not that he had hit her.

Mardou had a psychotic incident after one drunken night. She found a balloon and told Leo that since she had the balloon she wouldn't need him any longer and told him to go away. But he went back to her apartment and slept on the floor. She played with her balloon for hours before she slept. Leo began to worry because he saw a growing



interest in Mardou for Yuri. He blamed himself - his constant betrayal and drunkenness were driving her away. Yuri was a twenty-two year-old poet. His girlfriend had just left him and he was available. Was Mardou looking at Yuri as Leo's successor? Leo made sure to emphasize to Yuri that he was in love with Mardou. Fearing that he might be losing her, Leo began to pay her more attention. He read Faulkner aloud to her. They went to a French movie. He curbed his drinking and stayed home with her. He began to know her on a deeper level. They'd go to the beach and walk. They'd laugh and dance. He talked about going to Mexico again. Despite the closeness, he still was compelled to go home to make his mother dinner and see to her needs.

When they were at Larry O'Hara's one night, Leo, probably having too much to drink, suddenly rushed out the apartment and ran up and down the stairs. When he returned he found Mardou outside, upset and ready to leave. He began to question his own sanity. Things were deteriorating in the relationship. She was annoying him which her constant demands for money from him to buy food. On one occasion, he dropped money off to her and Alice was there. He suspected that Alice was a lesbian. Later when they're alone, he told Mardou that Adam told him not to get too serious with her because she was black. The hurt she felt radiated across the room. A short while later, he learned that she began seeing a black man.

Pages 51 through 75 Analysis

Leo and Mardou share their dreams, but not their reality. In his dream, Leo is able to express his fear about Mardou's devotion to him and the anger and doubts he has about her. He strikes out at her in his dream but, even though it's just a dream, he doesn't tell her that he hit her in his dream. Mardou's nightmare is about the father she never knew which symbolizes the feeling of abandonment that she has struggled with all her life. Her dream represents the uncertainty that she feels about Leo and whether he might abandon her.

Leo is a writer and is surprised how well Mardou is able to write. While he chooses to write a letter to a perfect stranger, someone he just met, she chooses to write to him. Leo possibly feels a resentment and envy for Mardou's ability to express herself in words. Although he's a writer, he's incapable of expressing the level of emotions that Mardou does with ease.

When Leo tests Mardou's devotion to him, he reveals his own insecurity. Because he has repressed anger about Mardou, he strikes back at her in a passive-aggressive manner by purposely hurting her and focusing his attentions on another woman.

The story hints at a possible homosexual relationship between Leo and a man that he and Mardou met in a bar. Mardou apparently senses an attraction between Leo and the man and feels threatened. In a tit for tat relationship, Mardou then chooses to spend time with a lesbian which Leo finds threatening. Rather than confronting the possibility that she is having a relationship with a woman, he strikes back by telling her that a friend advised him not to get too deeply involved with Mardou because she's black. The



cruel comment hurts deeply. Mardou retaliates by beginning a relationship with a black man. By doing so, she is telling him: "You reminded me that I'm black. So I should be with a black man." Their relationship is deteriorating into one of resentment and retribution.



Pages 76 through 111

Pages 76 through 111 Summary

Leo reminded himself how a woman had to be treated - a man had to fall on his knees to her, beg her forgiveness, protect her, support her, do for her, die for her and above all love her. The incident at the beach started with a very drunk Leo and Mardou being pushed up a hill in an abandoned cart pushed up by Yuri. They stayed the night at Adam's apartment and woke to a very angry Adam. The cart that they took from the beach belonged to an Armenian peddler. It's a stolen cart! And, they left it right in front of his place. Mardou remembered that she left her purse in the cart. When she went out to look for it, it was gone but the cart was still there. Adam and Leo got into a vicious argument, throwing keys at each other. Mardou told Leo he had no right to yell at Adam - it was his house! Later, he apologized to Mardou for his behavior.

Leo began to see a playfulness between Mardou and Yuri that bothered him. They were young. Their youth made him feel like an old man. Although Leo had been thinking about how to break it off with Mardou, seeing her with Yuri made him have second thoughts. Yuri was hanging out with Leo and Mardou almost every night - like an annoying shadow. Mardou and Yuri continued their playful interaction. An old shipmate, Jimmy Lowell, met up with the group. He told Leo he'd like to "make it with his chick." Leo told him that Mardou wasn't like that. She liked one man at a time.

On one occasion, Mardou told Leo that she and Yuri would stay at her apartment while he continued to party. Was that confirmation of what he suspected, he wondered. Later, Yuri assured Leo that he wasn't interested in Mardou. It was she that was "all over" him. Leo didn't believe him. They all decided to go to the house of another friend, simply referred to as Bromberg, in Los Altos. When they all boarded Harold Sand's car, Mardou immediately sat in the back with Yuri. When confronted, Mardou denied she had any interest in Yuri but again Leo didn't believe it. Yuri decided not to go with them to Los Altos. Later at Bromberg's house, Mardou sulked and Leo apologized to her for making the accusation. While Leo slept, Mardou, Harold and Bromberg went to the beach. When they returned, Mardou told him she wanted to go home because she had to go to her therapy session - which she had not been attending.

They took a silent ride back on the train. Yuri was at Mardou's apartment when they returned. While Mardou was changing, Leo told Yuri he didn't like how cozy he and Mardou had become. Yuri continued to deny any attraction and left for Adam's apartment. Leo told Mardou that he had confronted Yuri. Leo decided to go to Adam's apartment and Mardou came along. She accused him of wanting to confront Yuri again, knowing he was there. When they arrived, there were several other people in addition to Yuri and Adam.

Leo felt the growing remoteness from Mardou. Yuri borrowed a tie from Adam and announced he was going out to find a girl. Later, the entire party decided to go out for



more festivities. At Dante's bar, Mardou was quiet and distant. Everyone else seemed to be tired and bored. Only Leo tried to keep the party going but no one was interested. He called another friend, Sam, and made arrangements to meet him at another bar. He tried to drag Mardou along but they argued in the cab. She wanted to go home. He finally jumped out of the cab and let her go her own way. This is the end, he thought.

Leo became drunker as the evening turned into the next day. He went home but was too restless to stay there. He went to the railway yard and just cried. While he cried he thought of Mardou but the vision of his mother's expressionless face peering down at him competed with thoughts of Mardou. He was angry with himself for throwing Mardou away. His mother had loved and supported him through his drunkenness knowing that he didn't have it in him to find and hold a woman. The next night he went to Mardou's. She wasn't there but left a note that she would be back at 11:30 but she did not return. Leo left for Adam's apartment. Later, Mardou told him that she thought he'd never come back. She also told him that they should break up. They never do anything together. Never went to Mexico. He never got a job so they could live together. She had quit her therapy while she was with him. She had felt hurt when he jumped out of the cab. She confessed that she "made it" with Yuri. He had come by while Leo continued to party that night. Leo felt as if he were stabbed. He felt betrayed by Mardou and by Yuri. Mardou would continue to see Leo, but she wanted her independence and would see others. But that wasn't what Leo wanted. He went home feeling he lost her love and wrote this book.

Pages 76 through 111 Analysis

Leo knows deep down that it's the beginning of the end with Mardou. He sees a playfulness between Yuri and Mardou. They are closer in age than he and Mardou and there's a natural attraction between them. Seeing Mardou with Yuri makes Leo feel like "an old man." Even though he claims to have been planning to break off his relationship with Mardou, now that somebody else wants her, it's human nature that he wants her all the more. When another man, Jimmy Lowell, tells Leo that he would like to "make it" with Mardou, Leo responds that she is not like that. Mardou only wants one man at a time. His response to Jimmy is more wishful thinking than based in reality. He hopes that she wants only one man at a time but he knows deep down that it's not true. Leo's resentment and constant nagging at Mardou is pushing her further away.

Leo wanted the relationship to end but he wanted it to end on his terms. His fragile ego is having a difficult time being rejected by someone who he thought in many ways was his inferior. Instead of allowing the relationship to end naturally, he continues to press Mardou about her feelings for him. Her body language and actions speak louder than her words. She pouts and is remote around Leo but she laughs and has fun with Yuri.

Leo has regrets that he didn't treat her like a woman needs to be treated - to kneel before her and ask her permission, to love her and be ready to die for her. While he is mourning the impending end of their relationship, the image of Mardou in his mind is supplanted by that of his mother. Although his mother hadn't vocalized her thoughts,

Leo knows that she thinks he can't hold onto a woman - he's not equipped to maintain a relationship. In the end, Leo lives up to his mother's low expectations.



Characters

Leo Percepied

Leo Percepied is the main character of "The Subterraneans." He is a man who is approaching middle-age and is pursuing a writing career. However, Leo does not seem to be very serious about his career. He does not write very much. In fact, he doesn't have a typewriter or few if any writing gigs. As the story opens, Leo had just quit a job as a messman on a ship. He left the ship in New York and traveled to his home in San Francisco. He meets with his old friends, the self-titled subterraneans, at a local bar. His friends gather outside a favorite drinking spot. As he approaches, he spots a beautiful black girl leaning against the bumper of a car. He is immediately taken with her and becomes obsessed with her. At first, the girl, Mardou Fox, is not interested him but he persists and eventually they have a love affair.

Leo is probably fifteen years older than Mardou. Although he tries his best to hide his insecurities about Mardou, he is constantly concerned about her feelings for him and if she'll be true to him. He has doubts about her because she's black and has had a history of mental illness. He keeps a low profile with her because his domineering mother would not approve of his bi-racial relationship.

Leo is an alcoholic and a drug addict. He has no apparent income and lives at home with his mother who supports him. Although friends, including Mardou, tell him that his relationship with his mother is unhealthy, he cannot seem to break his ties with her. Leo's relationship with Mardou is threatened by a younger man in the social circle. Eventually, Leo loses his grip on Mardou but he is not sure if he drove her away or if she chose to leave him.

Mardou Fox

Mardou Fox is a young black woman who becomes involved with Leo, the main character in "The Subterraneans." She is much younger than Leo and at first is not interested in the older man who has a long history of substance abuse. When Leo meets Mardou, he learns that she is suffering from mental illness and is seeing a therapist. She is haunted by her early beginning. Her mother died when she was born, and she never knew her half-breed Cherokee father.

Leo is tenacious in his pursuit of Mardou and eventually they become involved and have a love affair. Mardou is more open about her feelings and in expressing her thoughts than is the neurotic Leo. She talks of breaking up with Leo because they don't do very much together. But he makes promises to change and for a future together and is able to keep the relationship going for a while. Mardou instinctively knows that Leo wasn't good for her because once she began seeing him, she stopped her therapy. She "flips



out" at times - has psychotic episodes - during which time she roams the street or rushes outside with no clothes on.

Mardou's writing talent and her ability to express herself in the written word impresses Leo who is a writer, or wants to be. But Leo has a difficult time revealing his heart to Mardou or anyone. Leo envies Mardou's ease in doing so. Leo's neuroses finally drive Mardou away and toward a younger man in their social set. In a true sign of mental health at the conclusion of the story, Mardou tells Leo that she wants to be independent.

Leo's Mother

The unemployed Leo lives with his mother who has a job and supports him. She is referred to as tyrannical and has an unhealthy impact on Leo's life.

Yuri

Yuri is a twenty-two year-old poet who parties with the subterraneans. Mardou eventually becomes attracted to Yuri and their dalliance essentially ends her relationship with Leo.

Julien Alexander

Julien Alexander is one of the self-titled subterraneans. He is referred to as the "angel" of the social circle.

Adam Moorad

Adam Moorad is a poet and friend of Leo. Adam was the friend who dubbed the group the subterraneans. Many of the parties that the group has are held at Adam's apartment.

Jimmy Lowell

Jimmy Lowell is an old friend of Leo. He boldly tells Leo that he would like to "make it with his chick." Leo tells him Mardou likes one man at a time.

Arial Lavina

Arial Lavina is a famous young writer that stumbles onto the subterraneans one night in a bar. Leo is impressed with her and stays to talk with her, refusing to go home with Mardou.



Bromberg

Leo and Mardou visit his old friend, Bromberg, in Los Altos. Mardou is distant with Leo during the visit and soon becomes involved with another man.

Larry O'Hara

Larry O'Hara is a member of the subterraneans. He had his eye on Mardou but when he sees Leo is attracted to her, he bows out.



Objects/Places

New York City

When Leo quit his job on the ship, he left the boat when it was docked in this city.

San Francisco

After Leo quit his job on the ship, he returned to his hometown in San Francisco, CA.

Montgomery Street

Leo first spotted Mardou when she was leaning against a car on Montgomery Street in San Francisco.

Dante's Bar

When Leo returned to San Francisco he met up with his old friends, the subterraneans, in Dante's bar.

The Heavenly Lane Apartment

The Heavenly Lane apartment was Mardou's apartment where she and Leo spent a lot of time.

South City

Leo lived with his mother in a house in a neighborhood in the south city.

Mardou's Letter

Mardou wrote a letter to Leo telling him of her feelings for him and her hopes for the future. Leo was impressed with her writing ability.

The Brooch

Mardou saw a brooch that she couldn't get out of her mind. She borrowed money from a neighbor so she could go buy it.

Los Altos

Leo, Mardou and some other friends visited an old pal of Leo's in Los Altos, CA.

Mexico

Leo always promised Mardou that he would take her to Mexico for a fabulous vacation. He never kept his promise.



Themes

Co-Dependency

"Co-dependence" is a buzz word of the eighties and nineties but the term aptly applies to the characters in Jack Kerouac's "The Subterraneans," which was written in the late 1950s. Needy people tend to seek each other out. One plays the "enabler" to the other who is the addict or the emotionally dependent one. But just like yin and yang, the two complete each other albeit in an unhealthy way. There is a plethora of examples of co-dependency in this work.

Leo, the main character, has a history of drug and alcohol abuse. He is a failure in life - a "wannabe" writer who doesn't even own a typewriter (1958's version of a PC). He doesn't seem to write for anyone including himself. To disguise his inability to live his dream when he returns to his home town, he seeks out his old friends who are just like him. The subterraneans are a band of would-be artists and writers who are better at drinking and partying than anything else. The members of this social set bolster each other up and feed each other's egos in their cruel game of pretend.

Leo is attracted to another emotionally fragile person. Mardou has had mental and emotional problems since being abandoned as a baby. She needs a man in her life because her father left her before she was born. Leo needs a woman to make him feel like a man. There are hints of his homosexuality which his ego demands that he prove the speculation wrong. Mardou is the woman that makes Leo a man. And Leo is the man who has replaced her missing father.

Perhaps the most pathetic co-dependent relationship is that of Leo and his mother. Although he is approaching middle-age, the unemployed and unengaged writer lives with his mother who works. When she comes home, she is exhausted. He makes her dinner and cleans up so she can watch TV. Leo his mother supported him through his alcoholism - supporting him through his addictions is not key to recovery in fact it just keeps a person in self-destruct.

The story ends with Mardou seeking independence from Leo - a sign of her growing health. Leo winds up with his mother, confused and regretful that he had possibly let true love slip through his hands. Destruction and addiction are the recipe for co-dependency. In this story as in life, it never does what it promises. It underscores the negative aspects in a person's character and further entrenches them in their addiction.

Abandonment

The fragile main characters in "The Subterraneans" struggle with fear of abandonment. Mardou Fox has a history of mental problems no doubt stemming from her very sad beginning. Her black mother died when she was born. She never knew her Cherokee half-breed father. Therefore, the moment Mardou was born, she was abandoned by



both parents. Even though her mother didn't want to leave her - she died - to a child it was just as much an abandonment as the father she never knew and was never in her life. She does not explain if her parents were a couple and her father left or if was just a casual relationship. Regardless of the circumstances, that early abandonment impacted Mardou the rest of her life. She suffered from mental and emotional problems and her need to belong led her down the wrong path more than once.

Leo has an unhealthy relationship with his mother. He's an adult, probably approaching middle-age, doesn't have a regular job and lives with his mother. She has abandoned him as a parent and is treating him more like a partner. His mother works and he prepares dinner for her and cleans up so she can watch more TV. That is not a description of a mother with a grown son. A loving and caring mother would encourage him to get a job and his own place. They are using each other.

Since both Leo and Mardou have abandonment issues, Mardou and Leo both fear that the other will leave. They don't have a deep relationship mainly due to Leo's inability to commit and get close to Mardou. Leo is plagued by dreams of Mardou with other men. Even though he claims he was planning on breaking up with her, when she shows interest in a younger man in their social set, he is destroyed.

Addiction

A strong theme that runs through the book, "The Subterraneans" by Jack Kerouac is addiction. There are the obvious addictions of drink and drugs that are a focus of the story. "The Subterraneans" which is what the group of friends have dubbed themselves, spend much of their time drinking in bars and clubs as well as drinking and partying at private gatherings. These men, who are seemingly in or nearing middle age, do not engage in social drinking—they drink to excess. The main character, Leo, speaks of his long history of drugs. Mardou speaks of the drug highs that the men in the group attain. She even fears that they have injected her with drugs when she was asleep. Many members of this social circle do not seem to be particularly successful in life which could be attributed to their substance abuse. However, their addictions could also be relied upon to blur that lack of success.

There are also less obvious addictions that are represented in this story in a more subtle manner. Leo is unable to break from the strings of his domineering mother. He is told by his friends that the relationship isn't healthy and he intrinsically knows it yet he is unable to sever the ties. The relationship with his mother feeds a deep-seated need that he has. On the surface, Leo uses his mother, who supports him, to keep from taking on the real responsibility of adulthood. He lauds his mother for seeing him through his years of alcoholism. However, by supporting him she has allowed him to maintain his addiction to alcohol. His substance abuse is fueled by a more basic fundamental addiction that he has to his mother—one addiction feeds the other.

Both Mardou and Leo have addictive personalities. As such, they are drawn to each other and enter into a relationship that is doomed from its onset. They get drunk



together and substitute the sharing of their addictions for a real and meaningful relationship. Mardou is more open with her feelings than Leo is. Leo uses drinking and substance abuse as a way to avoid bearing his real emotions. When they are together, their main experience together is partying with the other subterraneans which translates to drinking and always the drinking described is to excess.



Style

Point of View

"The Subterraneans" by Jack Kerouac is written in the first-person narrative from the point of view of the story's protagonist, Leo. The book is a stylized work that is presented in the stream-of-consciousness genre. As such, the reader is privy to the thoughts and motivations of the main character throughout the work. The reader learns immediately that Leo is beset with doubts and fears about himself and his future. He is a writer who drinks and parties more than he writes. He makes excuses but there is a level of honesty about that reflects his recognition that he is failing in life, failing himself and failing his dreams.

The author is considered one of the great literary voices of the twentieth century. His most famous work, "On the Road," is considered nothing less than a classic. Kerouac considered himself a jazz poet. There are poetic passages throughout the work and many references to music and jazz. Since the protagonist is a writer and a lover of jazz, it would not take a leap of faith to speculate with some certainty that some of the characters and events in "The Subterraneans" may have been based, at least in part, on Kerouac's own life and experiences.

Other works by Jack Kerouac include: "Dr. Sax", "Lonesome Traveler", "Mexico City Blues", and "Satori in Paris and Pic".

Setting

Leo Percepied has just returned to San Francisco from New York City, where he left a sea-faring ship on which he worked as a messman. Leo is going to meet his old pals, affectionately called "The Subterraneans," at Dante's, a favorite watering hole on Montgomery Street. Leo and his friends spend a lot of time in the bars around Frisco and at Adam's apartment where they party until the wee hours.

Leo becomes involved with Mardou Fox and spends a lot of time with her at her apartment which they call the Heavenly Lane apartment. Leo lives at home with his mother in what he refers to as the "south city."

Mardou struggles with mental and emotional problems. She sees a therapist on a frequent basis. When she gets very upset she "flips out" (has a psychotic episode) and walks the streets for hours. As she walks, she feels an electricity between her and the strangers she passes.

Leo and Mardou spend time on the beach, they see French movies and take a trip with some other friends to see an old pal in Los Altos. In one incident on the beach, Yuri, another friend, takes an abandoned cart from the beach and pushes the very drunk Leo and Mardou who are sprawled out in the cart up the hill to Adam's apartment. Adam is



upset because the pushcart belonged to an Armenian peasant and he's afraid the cops will think he stole it since it's outside his residence.

Language and Meaning

"The Subterraneans" by Jack Kerouac is a stream-of-consciousness work. As such, the rush of thoughts coming from the protagonist is at times a jumble of past, present and abstract thought mixed in with references to people, places and things the relevance of which are not at once clear. However, it is a legitimate style of writing and can be appreciated both as a story and as a work of art, if one sees it that way.

Kerouac is not only an author, he is a poet which is obvious from some of the passages that are lyrical and present an imagery that is not congruent with other parts of the story. For example, "When early in our love I was three hours late which is a lot of hours of lateness for young lovers, and so she wiggled, got frightened, walked around the church handsapocckts brooding looking for me in the mist of dawn." (Page 73) And another example, "O God the whole host and foolish illusion and entire rigamarole and madness that we erect in the place of onelove, in our sadness." (Page 91)

The book was written in 1958 and there are some phrases and references that are indicative of that time. He makes references to "bop" music and dancing "bop," the musical genre of which is lost on the current generation. Leo is a writer and speaks of getting a "typewriter" which, of course, dates the story. There are references to paying a cab driver a dollar for a ride. Mardou has a dime and takes hours to decide which two postcards at five cents each she can buy. There are references to Mardou "flipping out" which in modern language would translate to "having a psychotic episode." Also, there is a dated way of referring to African Americans in the story which was acceptable in 1956.

Structure

"The Subterraneans" by Jack Kerouac is a stream-of-consciousness work. As such, its structure abandons all forms of classic literature and is a sub-category of the modernist movement. A stream-of-consciousness work is just that - the story is presented as a rush of thoughts by the narrator of the story, in this case, the main character, Leo Percepied.

There is a minimum use of the sentence and paragraph structure typically seen in literary works. For example, some entire pages of the story are comprised of a conglomeration of run-on sentences without even one period appearing on the page. Some of the thoughts expressed in this story are about past events, some are present and some are abstract thoughts that have nothing to do with past or present. Since the reader is in a sense a voyeur, and are privy to the man's thought process, he has to cope with the narrator's words who does not distinguish between what is past, present or in the abstract. The reader has to make some assumptions and leaps of faith. Some

of the narrator's thoughts and comments remain a mystery as to their meaning and relevance.

Not surprisingly, stream-of-consciousness is difficult style for the reader who is attempting to follow the the plot and story. Another way for a reader to approach a stream-of-consciousness story is simply to enjoy it as a work of art. As in modern art, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

The author Kerouac is also a poet which is obvious from the many lyrical, poetic passages that one encounters in this work. Interpretation is at the reader's discretion. The reader has the choice of enjoying the art and lyricism of his words, determining how they fit into the story or both.



Quotes

"They [subterraneans] are hip without being slick, they are intelligent without being corny, they are intellectual as hell and know all about Pound without being pretentious or talking too much about it, they are very quiet, they are very Christlike." (Page 1)

"Actually I tell you—she's a whole lot and not a little crazy—she's having therapy, has apparently flipped only very recently." (Page 11)

"Men are so crazy, they want the essence, the woman is the essence, there it is right in their hands but they rush off erecting big abstract constructions." (Page 16)

"Protect yourself, angel of no harm, you who've never and could never harm and crack another innocent its shell and thin veiled pain." (Page 26)

"Bear with me all lover readers who've suffered pangs, bear with me men who understand that the sea of blackness in a dark-eyed woman's eyes in the lonely sea itself and would you go ask the sea to explain itself, or ask woman why she crosseth hands on lap over rose?" (Page 45)

"I'd put my face close to hers to talk about books, she'd turned her face to me close, it was an ocean of melting things and drowning. I could have [swam] in it, I was afraid of all that richness and looked away." (Page 51)

"We are like two animals escaping to dark warm holes and live our pains alone." (Page 60)

"You've got to fall down on your knees and beg the woman's permission, beg the woman's forgiveness for all your sins, protect her, support her, doing everything for her, die for her but for God's sake love her and love her all the way in and every way you can." (Page 76)

"Yes, I got mad and threw Adam's keys back at him, because 'friendship, admiration, poetry sleep in the respectful mystery' and the invisible world is too beatific to have to be dragged before the court of social realities." (Page 80)

"But I don't darkly any more now want to believe her - art is short, life is long - now I've got in full dragon bloom the monster of jealousy as green as any cliché cartoon rising in my being." (Page 86)

"Boy this is the real real beginning of the end, you can't go on much further, how much more vagueness can your positive flesh take and how long will it stay positive if your psyche keeps [attacking] it—boy, you are going to die, when bird get bleak—that's the sign." (Page 91)

"She talked about the war between men—"They have a war, to them a woman is a prize, to Yuri it's just that you prize has less value now." (Page 110)

Topics for Discussion

What was Leo's profession? What other work had he done?

What does the term "subterranean" mean in this story? Why was the a term a fitting one to describe the characters in this story?

What doubts did Leo have about his relationship with Mardou? Why?

Describe Leo's relationship with his mother? How did his mother influence his relationship with Mardou?

What attracted Leo to Mardou? What attracted Mardou to Leo?

Why were Leo and Mardou not good for each other? What impact did they have on one another?

What did Yuri represent to both Leo and Mardou? Why was he a trigger in a change in their relationship?